

Chapter 17

Working Anywhere and Working Anyhow?

A Tension-Based View on ICT and the Coordination of Work

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ABSTRACT

Working from anywhere relies heavily on information communication technologies (ICT). Scholars are increasingly utilizing a tension-based research lens to investigate organisational paradoxes which are rooted in opposite tendencies that might negate one another. Thus, computer-mediated communication can be both demanding and resourceful. The aim of this chapter is to present an analytical framework integrating three distinct but interrelated perspectives (task, medium and individual) to account for individuals' perceptions of job demands and job resources associated with the usage of ICT when working from anywhere. This chapter draws on insights from theories of media choice and communication performance, the self-determination theory and the job demands-resources model to better understand the impact of communication in the remote setting.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine the following scenario: Carlos is a project manager in a software development company. He left his previous job, because of the daily two-hour commute and difficulties balancing his professional and private lives. His new employer offered the opportunity to work from home, requiring only occa-

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sional visits to the office. Due to a lack of personal contact with co-workers, he sometimes feels lonely, but he enjoys the freedom of flexible working arrangements. Carlos has two colleagues with whom he is collaborating. Tamara is a programmer employed to solve special customer requests, and she works primarily in the office. Daniel, who prefers to telecommute, is responsible for the underlying software architecture and the integration of Tamara's program adjustments. Carlos' and Tamara's jobs are highly interdependent, and they frequently must exchange information and discuss changes, problems or customer requests. Daniel on the other hand mainly works on his own.

Usually, their information exchange is based on e-mail communication. For instance, after a client meeting Carlos writes down the information and sends it to his colleagues. Then Tamara and Daniel discuss the technical aspects and exchange their expertise in the office. When Tamara needs additional information or clarification from Carlos, she contacts him via email. Carlos occasionally complains about the large volume of email he receives from customers and colleagues. He usually interrupts his work for emails and replies immediately to inquiries. Tamara and Carlos often send several emails back and forth within a short period to clarify work related issues. On the one hand, Carlos feels obliged always to be available for his colleagues and customers and to respond as quickly as possible to emails. On the other hand, he experiences these emails as interruptions that distract him from doing his job carefully. Therefore, Carlos feels stressed and exhausted.

This scenario addresses different aspects of the benefits and challenges associated with distributed work and the intra-team communication supported by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT): Location-independent workers benefit from increased autonomy, job satisfaction, better work-life integration and less commuting costs, but are challenged when coordinating their tasks with fellow team members. Depending on the response and availability expectations of colleagues (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013) these workers might develop an 'always on attitude,' which increases the risk of additional stress and decreased well-being (Ter Hoeven, van Zoonen, & Fonner, 2016). Similarly, organizations might see distributed work as a means for employer branding which decreases worker fluctuation (Golden, Veiga, & Dino, 2008) or costs for facilities. Nevertheless, organizations are challenged to re-organize and adapt communication, coordination and distribution of work in location-independent work settings because of the decrease in face-to-face contact between peers (Golden & Raghuram, 2010). Many scholars have already addressed how the use of ICTs may introduce tensions or paradoxical consequences (Boell, Cecez-Kecmanovic, & Campbell, 2016; Hylmö & Buzzanell, 2002; Leonardi, Treem, & Jackson, 2010; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Pearlson & Saunders, 2001; Ter Hoeven et al., 2016) as ICT is "constructing a paradox for teleworkers who find the potential benefits of distributed work negated by the very technologies" that enable working from anywhere (Leonardi et al., 2010, p.86).

This chapter analyses the demands associated with location-independent work settings and how appropriate ICT, the choice of suitable media for different tasks and advanced media skills contribute to the realization of the positive effects of flexible (location-independent) work arrangements for both workers and employers. It contributes to existing literature in three ways. First, it provides a literature review of relevant results concerning organizational communication when employees work location-independent, and where face-to-face contact between co-workers is limited. Second, it integrates an individual psychological perspective with an information scientific perspective, linking communication performance to an individual's well-being and perceptions of stress. Third, it derives practical implications and guidelines for ways to communicate successfully with co-workers who are working outside of the office.

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